



Stopping the Dangerous Superbug

How to Protect Yourself Against Infection, in Any Hospital

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Pennsylvania officials today published a hospital-by-hospital breakdown of infection rates, so patients in the state will have an idea of where to get the cleanest medical care.

But those handy guidelines aren't available in every state, so what can you do to protect yourself against hospital infections?

These tips come from the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, a non-profit organization devoted solely to providing safer, cleaner, hospital care founded by former New York lieutenant governor Betsy McCaughey.

1. Ask that hospital staff clean their hands before treating you, and ask visitors to clean their hands too.

This is the single most important way to protect yourself in the hospital. If you're worried about being too aggressive, just remember your life could be at stake. All caregivers should clean their hands before treating you. Studies suggest that alcohol-based hand cleaners are more effective at removing most bacteria than soap and water. Do not hesitate to say the following to your doctor or caregiver: "Excuse me, but there's an alcohol dispenser right there. Would you mind using that before you touch me, so I can see it?" Don't be falsely assured by gloves. If caregivers have pulled on gloves without cleaning their hands first, the gloves are already contaminated before they touch you.

2. Before your doctor uses a stethoscope to listen to your chest, ask that it be wiped with alcohol.

Numerous studies show that stethoscopes are often contaminated with *Staphylococcus aureus* and other dangerous bacteria, because caregivers seldom take the time to clean them in between patient use. The American Medical Association recommends that stethoscopes routinely be cleaned for each patient. The same precautions should be taken for many other commonly used pieces of equipment, too.

3. If you need a "central line" catheter, ask your doctor about the benefits of one that is antibiotic-impregnated or silver-chlorhexidine coated to reduce infections.

4. If you need surgery, choose a surgeon with a low infection rate. Surgeons know their rate of infection for various procedures. Ask for it. If they won't tell you, consider choosing another surgeon.

5. Beginning three to five days before surgery, shower daily with 4 percent chlorhexidine soap. Drug stores that don't stock chlorhexidine soap are generally happy to order it for you. You don't need a prescription. Studies suggest that using this soap will help remove any dangerous bacteria you may be carrying on your own skin that could enter your surgical incision and cause an infection. Keep the soap away from your eyes and ears.

6. Ask your surgeon to have you tested for *Staphylococcus aureus* at least one week before you come into the hospital. The test is simple, usually just a nasal swab. About one third of people carry *Staphylococcus aureus* on their skin, and if you are one of them, extra precautions can be taken to protect you from infection, to give you the correct antibiotic during surgery, and to prevent you from transmitting bacteria to others.

7. If you do smoke, stop smoking well in advance of your surgery. Patients who smoke are three times as likely to develop a surgical site infection as nonsmokers, and have significantly slower recoveries and longer hospital stays.

8. On the day of your operation, remind your doctor that you may need an antibiotic one hour before the first incision. For many types of surgery, a pre-surgical antibiotic is the standard of care, but it is often overlooked by busy hospital staff.

9. Ask your doctor about keeping you warm during surgery. Operating rooms are often kept cold for the comfort of the staff, but research shows that for many types of surgery, patients who are kept warm resist infection better. There are many ways to keep patients warm, including special blankets, hats and booties, and warmed IV liquids.

10. Do not shave the surgical site. Razors can create small nicks in the skin, through which bacteria can enter. If hair must be removed before surgery, ask that clippers be used instead of a razor.

11. Ask that your surgeon limit the number of people (including medical students) in the operating room. Every increase in the number of people adds to your risk of infection.

12. Ask your doctor about monitoring your glucose (sugar) levels continuously during and after surgery, especially if you are having cardiac surgery. The stress of surgery often makes glucose levels spike erratically. New research shows that when blood glucose levels are tightly controlled to stay between 80-110 mg/unit, heart patients resist infection better. Continue monitoring even when you are discharged from the hospital, because you are not fully healed yet.

13. Avoid a urinary tract catheter if possible. It is a common cause of infection. The tube allows urine to flow from your bladder out of your body. Sometimes catheters are used when busy hospital staff don't have time to walk patients to the bathroom. Ask for a diaper or bed pan instead. They're safer.

14. If you must have an IV, make sure that it is inserted and removed under clean conditions and changed every three to four days. Intravenous catheters, or IVs, are a common source of infection and are not always necessary. If you need one, insist that it be inserted and removed under clean conditions, which means that your skin is cleaned at the site of insertion, and the person treating you is wearing clean gloves. Alert hospital staff immediately if any redness appears.

For even more information, check out our source:

<http://www.hospitalinfection.org/>

For the Pennsylvania report <http://www.phc4.org/reports/hai/>